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## SLABSIDES AND THE SABINE FARM

### AN IMAGINARY CONVERSATION

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(Scene: The living-room of a camp cottage. Doors open opposite each other on the long sides, and a staircase goes up at the back. At the north there is a great fireplace made of rough field stones, in which a bright log fire is burning. At the left of the fireplace are bookshelves, and beside them a window-seat with a red Indian rug over it. In this corner of the room stands a large, pine-wood table with rustic legs, on which are books and papers. A photograph of Walt Whitman is on the wall near. On the other side of the fireplace is a cupboard with dishes and a kitchen table. At the south of the room in a deep alcove stands a rustic bed. Near the foot of the staircase stands a long pine table—evidently the dining-table. Two rocking-chairs are drawn up in front of the fireplace and in one sits a man over seventy, dressed in gray, with white hair and beard, blue eyes, and vigorous frame. As the October rain falls more heavily outside, he stirs the fire. When he looks up, a guest is sitting in the other chair. He is of medium stature; his gray hair waves over a low forehead; his face is smooth; he wears a voluminous white robe of soft wool. The man in gray, who is John Burroughs, speaks.)

“Welcome, stranger, to Slabsides. It is a bad night to be on the road, and I know that white garb must need drying at my fire.”

“My robe is not wet, for I have come through kinship to you, not by traveling, so I did not need to be girded high. Bonds of congeniality break down barriers, and Quintus Horatius Flaccus, longing for an atmosphere like his Sabine farm’s, has escaped for a little while from the shades.”

“I have often wanted to talk with you, Horatius, and my desire must have helped bring you. I have wondered whether you would like this little place of mine and the independence of my life here.”

“Your fire is very welcome to me. I believe in shutting out the cold and heaping high the logs with lavish hand. In its cheer you must tell me more of your house.”

“This is not my real roof-tree. That is a stone house down by the river, built of the native rock. But this one-room shack with

the bark of the trees on the outside, dropped like a bird's nest in the wood, is the study where I live alone for days and write."

"I had but one house, but it was in the quiet of the Sabine hills, far from the smoke and wealth and noise of Rome. It was larger than this, but quiet enough to give me peace for writing."

"I have been reading that the Italian archaeologists claim to have found the site of your house, Horatius, and that the place is so elaborate that learned men say either it cannot be your villa or else all your talk about the simple life was mere pretense."

"You would not have me end their discussion by assertion, would you? No! Let every Tigellius drone on his lore to his female pupils from his arm-chair, and all who wish discuss how far distant was Codrus from ancient Inachus. *You* know from my writings that my house had no columns of African marble supporting architraves from Hymettus, and that inside I cared most about the hearth-fire. The house itself did not mean so much to me as my piece of land and its surroundings. Mountains all around it had, John Burroughs, but broken, so that the morning and the evening sun warmed the valley. Then there was a piece of woodland, a spring of pure water, berry bushes, oak trees, a great pine over the house, a river below."

"You had in one place what I have in several. I will take you down presently to my spring here and you will find its water, too, clearer than glass and useful for head and stomach. But for your encircling mountains I have to go back to my birthplace in the heart of the southern Catskills. There the green hills rise on all sides and the little trout stream makes music over the rocks."

"I should miss that sound of the water here at your Slabsides in summer, for I confess to liking to steal a part of the solid day to lie under the greenwood tree or beside the sacred source of some gently flowing stream. The river near my house was one of those little brooks in whose murmur I delight."

"Tell me, Horatius, were you only a play-farmer, or did you really cultivate your ground and eat food that you did not have to buy?"

"My own hands did not do much work, for when I took a pick and turned the glebes, the neighbors all laughed at my awkwardness. The slaves did the farm work. But my wine was made at

home and my fare was simple—olives and mallows, leaks, peas, and cakes. Even Maecenas had to be content with my country produce when he came out from his palace towering to the stars.”

“I too have vineyards on the hill sloping to the Hudson, the great river near my real house, and here in this little valley at Slab-sides a farmer who rents the ground of me raises celery in the rich, black soil. But I have to buy my olives. I envy you that tree of Italy.”

“Still, by Bacchus, you have the vine and, as I told Varus, there is no tree that one would rather set out than that. And then, after all, who would change his own country for tree or aught else of another’s? When you came back from October abroad, you said you ‘experienced the delight that only the returned traveler can feel—the instant preference of one’s own country and countrymen over all the rest of the world.’ I, even fresh from Greece, let others praise Apollo’s Delphi and Pallas’ Athens. Nor did hardy Lacedaemon move me as much as the rushing Anio and the groves of Tibur.”

“You must have lived a happy life in your Sabine valley, even though you never married and never had sturdy sons and little grandchildren to lisp your name. ‘A childless life is a tree without branches, a house without windows.’ I could not get along without my grandson, little John Burroughs. I believe *he* is going to be a poet, for when he was in his cradle, ‘I saw his eye in a fine frenzy rolling’!”

“Ah! But no thought of heir kept me from enjoying my little fortune, and women came with laughter and lyre and song—Lalage, Cinara, Tyndaris. As many men, as many tastes. And while I am in my right senses, I would never compare anything with a pleasant friend.”

“There are women now such as you never conceived, Horatius, even with your praise of the sunburned Apulian wife and your admiration of Cleopatra’s courage. They come to see me from a great college near, strong of body, quick of mind, real comrades, and they quote your poem about your Bandusian spring at my spring.”

"I always dreaded the fate of being studied by school children in remote country districts, but I never thought that such a lot awaited me in a school for Chloës and Leuconoës!"

"Well, you knew the worth of friendship with men, and you knew all sorts and enjoyed all, great and small. I've often thought of your going about with Maecenas in his *raeda* as I do with Mr. Ford in his automobile. The emperor Augustus you were never as closely associated with as I was with Colonel Roosevelt when we went camping and tramping in the Rockies, yet rumor said that he wished to make you his secretary in his household once."

"True, he did, but one period of service as a *scriba*, even for a quaestor, was enough to give me a distaste for such routine work."

"I know. I held a governmental position once and kept accounts, sitting on a high stool, while it was spring in Washington, and Walt Whitman was out on the open road. I could not stand it long."

"Walt Whitman! I have only seen his great and vital shade. Tell me more of the man."

"'Vital' is indeed the word for him. He had in the flesh the wonderful personality that fills his poems. He was as strong as a man and as tender as a woman. He gave up his life to nurse the wounded soldiers in the war, for that work broke down his magnificent physique and his old age was spent in a paralytic's chair, by the window, as you see him there in the picture. His poetry is as great as he was great."

"I remember about Whitman now. He was the new poet you helped make known to the world in that splendid defense, 'The Flight of the Eagle.' The generations are alike, and still it is hard for the critics to realize that any writing is good which does not bear the stamp of antiquity. Every old poem is sacred to them, and they forget that if the Greeks had hated the new as we do, we should now have no classics! I tried to make the Romans of my time appreciate Vergil and Varius as well as Ennius and Accius, but it was hard work."

"Your satires and epistles, though poems, are much like my essays, for they let you comment on men and books, on life and literature. Their style is conversational and not learned, and their appeal directly to the reader."

"I never called my *sermones* poems, for they were the work of a pedestrian muse and lacked the grand style and the genius of true poesy. No, I had a right to knock at the stars only because of my odes."

"Such poetry as that I have never written. My verses are simple strains of bird and bough. Some said, 'John, print them,' others said, 'Not so,' but I printed them, for they meant to me the song of the thrush and the call of the bluebird."

"I have no real nature poems unless you would so call the one on the Bandusian spring. But I loved the country: the sound of running water, the shade of trees, the flowers of the rose and the myrtle, the rocks painted with moss, the startled fawn in the wood. I had it all out with Aristius Fuscus, who was a lover of the city always. I told him that I lived and reigned when once I had left the things which he extolled to heaven."

"And one needs the country for writing."

"Yes, how could any man write poems in Rome in the midst of so many anxieties and labors? There were always calls to make, business to attend, the distracting noises of the street to interrupt tuneful verses. The whole band of poets rightly loves the woods and shuns the city."

"I do my writing here, often spend long days and nights here entirely by myself, or with perhaps my neighbor's dog for company."

"You read here, too, I see from these books by the wall."

"Yes, I do not own many, but I have read them all."

"It was ever a joy to me when I could pack up Plato and Menander and be off to the country with them. I went to the Greeks for my inspiration."

"Did you get your philosophy of life, too, from them?"

"I started out to, but I found that there a man cannot be sworn to follow the word of any master."

"Two American writers gave me a lift forward—Emerson and Whitman—but I too found that for a philosophy of life, as well as for writing, a man has to leave all models and get down to his real self and his real thought."

"And then how simple a thing the philosophy that one can use and live by becomes! To be contented with little and scorn

great possessions, to make much of friendship and nothing of office, to live to the full one's own life, and yet somehow (perhaps by writing) to serve others, and then not to be afraid of death, nor become embittered by old age, but to grow happier and more mellow as the years pass!"

"That is my philosophy, too, at 'the summit of the years.' 'I have kept apart from the strife and fever of the world, and the maelstrom of business and political life, and have sought the paths by the still waters, and in the quiet fields, and life has been sweet and wholesome to me. . . . I say to myself, What is all this rattling machinery of government for, but that men may all have just the sane and contented life that I am living, and on the same terms that I do? They can find it in the next field, beyond the next hill, in the town or in the country—a land of peace and plenty, if one has peace in his heart.' "

"How often I have said that! 'What you seek is here, is at Ulubrae, if you have a contented spirit.' "

"And then I have escaped the greed of wealth; the 'mania of owning things,' as Whitman called it."

"Man really owns only what he can use."

" 'I have escaped the disappointment of political ambition, of business ambition, of social ambition; I have never been a cog in anybody's wheel, or an attachment to the tail of anybody's kite. I have never lost myself in the procession of parties or trained with any sect or clique. I have been fortunate in being allowed to go my own way in the world.' "

"It is right that each man should measure himself by his own footrule."

" 'And the longer I live the more my mind dwells upon the beauty and the wonder of the world.' I am a great believer in letting Nature work and send her divine influence through the whole being. It was out of the truth that Nature and experience gave me that I wrote my best poem:

Serene, I fold my hands and wait,  
Nor care for wind, or tide, or sea;  
I rave no more 'gainst time or fate,  
For, lo! my own shall come to me."

“I read those *iambi* of yours and they helped bring me to you—like to like. I am glad that while the pursuit of wealth still torments the ambitious and a strenuous doing of nothing wears out the restless, at Slabsides you have found the secret of right living. I hope we shall talk again. At least we have had this day, and what once has passed, even Jupiter cannot undo or steal. John Burroughs, I know one more white soul. Live. Farewell.”

Suddenly the second chair by the Slabsides' fire was empty.